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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates issues-centered instruction looks in two ninth grade classrooms composed of large numbers of low achieving high school students. The key principles of issues-centered instruction are described with an examination of the barriers of the approach with low achieving students. The paper reports on two world geography classrooms of low achievers who studied Latin America and the Caribbean using an issues-centered approach. The researcher worked with classroom teachers and planned an eight-day unit on Latin America and the Caribbean based on the principles of issues-centered instruction. Field notes from observations and interviews provided the qualitative data. (Contains 28 references.) (EH)

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ISSUES-CENTERED INSTRUCTION IN TEACHING INTERNATIONAL ISSUES TO LOW ACHIEVING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ISSUES-CENTERED INSTRUCTION IN TEACHING INTERNATIONAL STUDIES TO LOW ACHIEVING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS[1]

A primary goal of social studies education is to create informed, thoughtful citizens able to make decisions and take action on important contemporary problems. Advocates of this goal have long called for social studies instruction organized around the study of historical and contemporary public issues. Critics of issues-centered instruction contend that it is fine for above average and advanced learners but too difficult for low achieving students. They assert, for example, that many adolescents are developmentally incapable of the higher order thinking required by issues-centered instruction. Others claim that low achieving adolescents demonstrate little interest in public issues and therefore are less likely to engage in interactive strategies. The purpose of this research was to investigate what issues-centered instruction looks like in two classrooms composed of large numbers of low achieving high school students. First, I will describe the key principles of issues-centered instruction and examine the barriers of the approach with low achieving students. Second, I will report on two classrooms of low achievers who studied Latin America and the Caribbean using an issues-centered approach.

The Principles of Issues-Centered Instruction

The issues-centered approach to instruction rests on a rich theoretical framework, developed and refined by John Dewey (1933), Harold Rugg (1939), Alan Griffin (1942), Hunt and Metcalf (1955), Oliver and Shaver (1966), Newmann and Oliver (1970), and Engle and Ochoa (1988). What are the key principles of issues-centered instruction? First, issues-centered units of instruction are organized around problematic, persisting questions that contain elements of doubt or controversy. For example, a unit on Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal rather than becoming a litany of famous "alphabet agencies" would investigate the question "Who is responsible for reducing poverty in the United States--the government or the individual? Such a question is persisting and controversial, going to the heart of several subject matter disciplines and relevant to the contemporary interests and experiences of students.

The second principle is that in-depth understanding of a topic is more important than superficial coverage. The content of the instruction must introduce students to an issue's complexities and details (Evans, Newmann, & Saxe, 1996). Students must examine numerous pieces of information from a variety of divergent sources about the many dimensions of a topic. For example, in the unit on the New Deal students need to understand the effects of the Great Depression on different groups such migrant farmers, black sharecroppers, and factory workers as well as how the New Deal programs did or did not respond to these effects and the implications of Roosevelt's policies for the role of government. The point is that asking students to make reasoned decisions about important societal issues requires a sufficient knowledge base (Chi, 1985; Cornbleth, 1985).

Third, issues-centered instruction provides opportunities, support and assessment mechanisms for disciplined student-centered inquiry. This principle places the learner's active mental construction of information at the heart of instruction. It asserts that real understanding emerges from a learner's own struggle to make sense of the data (Resnick, 1983). This requires teaching students thinking skills and an open classroom climate that fosters skepticism and reflectivity. In other words, issues-centered instruction is not a series of detailed, coherent and meaningful lectures delivered by the teacher on the New Deal and its implications for the role of government. Rather, it de-emphasizes the role of the teacher as transmitter of knowledge and challenges the student to draw conclusions and defend positions.

Fourth, this sense of inquiry thrives when there is substantive conversation between the teacher and students and among students about the issue being explored. In the classroom this means extensive use of interactive strategies like teacher-led discussions, scored group discussions, debates, and role plays. In issues-centered instruction the sense of inquiry about knowledge is enhanced by continual dialogue among students.

Issues-Centered Instruction in the Classroom

What happens when curricula designed around these principles meet the externalities of the everyday classroom? In her review of research on issues-centered instruction, Carole Hahn (1996) concludes that issues-centered social studies under the proper conditions holds much promise for its positive effects on students. In particular, she concludes that in issues-centered classrooms students enjoy social studies more, become more interested in and knowledgeable about societal issues, and perceive social studies instruction as useful for understanding the world around them. Moreover, under the proper conditions, students are more likely to participate in class discussions and express more reflective thinking than they do typically.

On the other hand, Hahn cautions that difficulties can arise. Such curricula can become complex and challenging for teachers to prepare and for students to learn. It requires trained teachers capable of conducting interactive lessons and promoting an open classroom climate. Yet, these skills are among the most difficult for teachers to acquire and implement. Furthermore, students experience issues-centered instruction in different ways, some participating while others remain disengaged. Last, there is the belief among many teachers that issues-centered social studies works only with above average to advanced students. It is to this claim that I now turn.

Social Studies for Low Achieving Students

Even though issues-centered instruction is not common in most high school social studies classes, it is particularly absent in classes composed largely of low achieving students. A review of social studies programs and curricula for low achieving students reveals a pattern of simplified courses of questionable validity if the primary purpose of social studies is the development of informed, open-minded citizens (Curtis, 1991). Classes of low achievers more often offer a passive drill and practice curriculum that emphasizes trivial bits of information and avoids exposure to more demanding topics and skills (Metz, 1978; Curtis, 1991; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992). Teachers in these classrooms tend to prefer more concrete, highly-structured assignments that reflect more deductive than inductive modes of instruction.

Why do teachers adopt these methods of instruction with low achieving students? What are the barriers that block issues-centered instruction in such classes? First, many teachers assume that all adolescents, particularly low achieving ones, are developmentally incapable of the high order thinking required by issues-centered instruction. The validity of this belief is hotly contested. Although an advocate of a modified, scaled-down version of issues-centered instruction, Leming (1994) argues that on average most high school students struggle drawing conclusions and using evidence to support them. On the other hand, Keating (1988) and Pogrow (1990) contend that there is no persuasive evidence of fundamental constraints on the ability of adolescents to engage in higher order thinking.

Second, many teachers believe that low achieving students have an insufficient knowledge base to understand, discuss, and make decisions about controversial questions. Low achieving students often do not complete the homework or fully understand the readings that supply the information. Thus, teachers are forced to proceed with activities in which students lack the knowledge base to participate in a reasoned manner or opt solely to supply content without asking students to use it to draw conclusions about a problematic question (Bickmore, 1993; Rossi, 1996). The failure to develop the knowledge base and do homework partially reflects a third barrier--low motivation among low achieving students. Teachers report that students have changed over the years and are less willing to put effort into school (Onosko, 1991; Rossi, 1996).

Fourth, establishing and maintaining classroom control is a top priority of teachers in low level classes. According to teachers, issues and strategies that invite dialogue among students often make classroom control more difficult (Metz, 1978; McNeil, 1986; Bickmore, 1993). Thus, teachers turn to structured worksheets and tasks as a means of keeping students quiet and orderly.

These barriers do not necessarily mean that issues-centered instruction is ineffective with low achieving students. Curtis and Shaver (1982) report that issues approaches with low achieving students increased their interest in contemporary problems, increased their skills in critical thinking, and reduced closed-mindedness. Bickmore (1993) claims that a more conflictual

curriculum gives low status students a better opportunity for participation. These research results suggest that issues-centered instruction can be beneficial for low achieving students.

The Research Agenda and Design

What I have suggested so far is that while issues-centered instruction shows promise in fostering interest in and knowledge about social issues, many teachers perceive it as possible only with above average and advanced students. Yet in a democracy it is essential that all citizens regardless of socioeconomic status, ability, or level of academic achievement have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be responsible citizens. Furthermore, some research suggests that issues-centered instruction or elements of it can be effective with lower achieving students. What is clear is the relative lack of research on what issues-centered instruction looks like in practice with low achieving students. There are few qualitative studies of how teachers and students behave in low achieving social studies classrooms following an issues-centered approach.

The purpose of this research was to provide a qualitative description and analysis of issues-centered instruction in two ninth grade world geography classes composed of large numbers of low achieving students. The central question that guided the research was "what does issues-centered instruction look like in classrooms with large numbers of low achieving students?" More specifically, three sub-questions guided the study: (1) How was knowledge organized and used, and what adjustments did teachers make for low achieving students when organizing the knowledge? What meaning did students give to the knowledge? (2) What was the nature of social interaction in these classrooms? What meaning did students give to the interaction? (3) What teaching dilemmas did teachers face in such classrooms, and how did they manage them?

Setting and Participants. The research occurred in two ninth grade world geography classes at Taylor High School, located in a suburb of a metropolitan region in a mid-Atlantic state. The first class taught by Alan Nicholson was composed of 24 heterogeneously-grouped students, including a significant number of what Nicholson labeled "low level" students, some because of "lack of motivation" or "lack of confidence" and others labeled LD (learning disabled), ED

(emotionally disturbed), or ADD (attention deficit disorder). The second class taught by Frank Eastwood was composed of 32 students, also of diverse abilities, officially classified as a collaborative class because of the 10 special education students in the classroom. Seven or eight other students, although not labeled as students with special needs, were low achievers because of lack of motivation, attention, skills, or ability.

In addition to my role as a participant observer, other participants included the two teachers and five students who were interviewed. Holding an undergraduate degree in history, Nicholson had taught for 13 years, the past nine at Taylor. A recent graduate in social science, Eastwood was in his second year of teaching and was working on his master's degree in curriculum and instruction. Both attended a one week institute the previous summer sponsored by the United States Institute of Peace on teaching about international issues since the end of the Cold War. During the institute they received some exposure to issues-centered instruction and various interactive teaching strategies. Thus, they were selected because of the academic level of their classes and their participation in the institute. The two teachers and the researcher selected the five students to be interviewed. They included three males and two females.

Data Collection and Analysis. I employed primarily qualitative methods in the collection of data, beginning with fieldnotes from two day-long planning sessions during which the two teachers and I planned an eight day unit on Latin America and the Caribbean based on the principles of issues-centered instruction. Over the next three and one half weeks, I observed and prepared fieldnotes from thirteen 90 minute class sessions, conducted two independent interviews with each teacher, one before the first planning session and the other at the end of teaching the unit. I also conducted one joint interview with the teachers following the planning sessions and interviewed the five students individually or in teams of two at the end of the unit. I utilized data from other sources to increase opportunities for triangulation, including student readings, worksheets, student written work, and a student survey. Given at the end of the unit, the student survey asked each student to evaluate what they had learned and what interested them about the content and activities in the unit.

The analysis process included coding chunks of data to form domains from which a list of initial assertions were drawn (Spradley, 1979). In order to ensure an analysis consistent with the perspective of the teachers, Eastwood completed a similar analysis using the same fieldnotes and interview transcripts and responded to my initial set of assertions. Eastwood and I met three times to discuss the two sets of domains, the assertions, and the first draft of the manuscript. The two analyses produced the following descriptive and interpretive portrait.

The Organization of Knowledge and Dynamics of the Unit

In selecting and organizing the knowledge for the unit on Latin America and the Caribbean we followed a model based on the principles of issues-centered instruction. The model included six elements: (1) a central unit question that focused on a persisting issue of interest to students; (2) an introductory grabber that would generate student interest; (3) in-depth knowledge about the issue; (4) a sense of inquiry where students had opportunities to give meaning to information; (5) social interaction among the students about the knowledge; and (6) sustained time for the unit (Rossi, 1993). Released from their normal teaching responsibilities, Nicholson and Eastwood met with me during two full days to plan the unit.

The planning process first turned inward to identify the essential knowledge for the unit and then turned outward to determine how best to communicate the knowledge to students. We identified economic underdevelopment, income disparity, political instability and cultural richness as key themes in the region. Our next concern was how to connect these themes to the concerns and experiences of ninth graders. Nicholson and Eastwood reported that their students are always raising questions about why they need to study other cultures. Thus, we agreed that the central question would be "Why should we care about Latin America and the Caribbean?

We designed two grabber activities to generate student interest and to foreshadow the central question. We all believed that such grabbers were particularly vital with low achieving students to capture their interest in the unit. The first grabber was an attitude questionnaire on immigration, drug trafficking and Latin America which students completed and discussed. The

second was a map activity in which students acted as drug lords plotting routes to ship their drugs from Columbia to various U.S. cities without getting caught in DEA security areas. Both activities generated student interest and involvement. In fact, students reported in the survey that the drug route activity was one of the top three activities in the entire unit.

The provision for in-depth knowledge entailed teacher-directed student research about Mexico, Cuba, Columbia, Panama, and Haiti using PC Globe and selected readings. First, each student completed a physical and political map of the region and took a quiz on the region's features. Next, to help students gather and organize the data, we designed a chart. Divided into six categories such as physical geography and history, the chart asked students to identify important information, link the information to its effect on the United States, and identify the issue raised by the information. We used data on Mexico to model the use of the chart before we asked them to do it independently for one of the four other countries. For example, in the physical geography category, most students decided that the location of Mexico on the southern border of the U.S. linked the two countries in terms of the movement of goods and people, thereby creating immigration and trade as potential public issues. For assessment purposes, each student wrote a letter to President Clinton explaining why we should care about Mexico.

For resources, we rejected the textbook as too superficial. Rather, we found relevant articles from a variety of sources to supplement PC Globe. We decided that a large number of long, difficult supplemental readings might frustrate the students. Consequently, we combined, condensed, and edited the readings to make them more manageable.

The social interaction in the unit revolved around two culminating activities--presentations on the four countries and policy debates on immigration and drug trafficking. During the country presentations, a group of student experts on Cuba, Columbia, Haiti, and Panama made a presentation to another group of students who acted as the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. In each presentation the group built a case for why its country deserved foreign aid from the United States and answered Committee questions. The teachers selected leaders for each group and primed them privately on their roles as coaches and mentors in their

groups. For the policy debates, the class was divided into six groups, three debating immigration policy and three debating drug trafficking policy. Each group was given a policy option and prepared arguments and evidence in support of the option. The three groups argued their positions and were questioned and judged by the other three groups. We designed a worksheet for each group where the students listed their reasons for the option and the supporting evidence. Like before, we also combined, condensed, and edited readings on each issue. At the end of the unit, each student wrote a short essay on the central unit question.

The Nature of Social Interaction

Social interaction during the unit occurred in a variety of forms, from teacher-led analyses of data to student presentations and policy debates to small group discourse. I examined the character of this social interaction using Lampert's (1985) concept of teaching dilemmas to clarify the practical problems faced by the two instructors. Lampert asserts that a teacher's attempt to solve everyday common classroom pedagogical problems can lead to a series of practical dilemmas. Lampert accepts these dilemmas as a continuing condition entangled in a web of contradictory forces that teachers seek to manage. Nicholson and Eastwood confronted a series of such dilemmas as they directed and monitored the social interaction during their issues-centered unit for low achieving students.

The first form of social interaction consisted of teacher-led discussions of data gathered from PC Globe and supplemental readings. These discussions confronted Nicholson and Eastwood with the first practical dilemma--a struggle between the desire for open, spontaneous discourse and the need for structure and teacher direction. Eastwood believed that ninth graders liked to argue, declaring that "some low achievers are very volatile human beings . . discussion is the one thing that will ignite them" (Interview, 5/22). On the other hand, he also believed that such spontaneity occurs only after helping students to gather and organize relevant data. For example, in the unit he and his students together gathered data on Mexico from PC Globe, placing the information in one of five categories on a chart. They also read articles aloud, stopping after

each paragraph to dissect its meaning. Eastwood praised this structure because it allowed low achievers to identify and explain information in a language all could understand.

Although pleased with the directed readings, Eastwood did have a reservation about them, commenting " . . .it's a lot of reading, a lot of teacher-directed activity . . .and will produce a lot of boredom by the end of the period for the students" (Interview, 5/22). Stopping after each paragraph to ask questions and to explain the meaning of the text, Eastwood believed that such directed reading deepened student understanding. Yet, midway through the reading, the interest level often waned (FN 4/25). Despite the emerging boredom, Eastwood continued the activity because his key concern was that low achievers would not understand the information unless guided by his direction.

Nicholson also believed in the importance of structure, particularly with low achievers. However, Nicholson's structure gave students responsibility and autonomy for the research and interpretation of the data. While using the same chart as Eastwood, he provided time for his students, individually or in pairs, to collect and interpret the data without his direction. He then conducted a full class discussion during which students announced what they had found and talked about its implications for the United States. Proceeding in this fashion, the students remained on task and highly engaged throughout the activity. What Nicholson provided was a structure and direction within which students had some autonomy and were more likely to stay on task. Developing structure and direction that promotes autonomy and spontaneity, not boredom and teacher domination was a dilemma each teacher faced as their students struggled to collect and give meaning to data.

Student Presentations. A second form of social interaction revolved around the country presentations and policy debates. During these activities there was variation among students in terms of depth of understanding, amount of student involvement, and quality of student-to-student discourse. Three samples illustrate the variation.

In the first sample, a group representing Columbia in Nicholson's class made a presentation to the Foreign Relations Committee (FRC) asking for assistance from the United

States for their country. Their presentation consisted of reading a newstory from the local newspaper about the drug pipeline from Cali into their state, a role play of an interview with a Colombian cocaine farmer, a second interview with a Colombian drug enforcement officer, and an extended exchange between the group and the FRC. These students were able to organize and carry out creative activities that also demonstrated an in-depth understanding of content, in this case the origins of the drug trafficking problem in Columbia. Nicholson's skill as a teacher facilitated the success of the presentation. Prior to the presentations, Nicholson showed a videotape of a poor presentation and asked a group from another class to showcase their exemplary presentation. In addition, as the presentations continued, Nicholson encouraged the FRC to request that groups return at the next session with rebuttal statements and rough drafts of treaties for the FRC. The Columbia group, in fact, returned with an official treaty on parchment, leading one student to comment that she thought the activity was "cool" (FN, 5/10).

In the second sample the social interaction is more deliberate and scripted, reflecting a basic but limited understanding of the issue. It comes from the group presentations on the second policy option in the debate on what the U.S. should do about drug trafficking from foreign countries into the United States. The three presentations were followed by only five student questions and a brief exchange between two students on a few factual items. The dialogue was not spontaneous and lively but mirrored the worksheet each group had prepared. Students merely read what they had written. The thinking was scripted and mechanical, the students becoming captive of the procedures in the structure. Although disappointed, Nicholson indicated that student participation in discussion is developmental, believing that ninth graders gradually acquire greater confidence to participate in discussion. The use of preparatory worksheets and a scripted procedure aided that confidence.

In the third sample, the student presentation provokes student interest but contains little content or understanding. For their presentations before the FRC, one group in Eastwood's class role played a drug bust and another conducted a Jeopardy-like game that mostly focused on facts about their country. For these groups, the presentations became more important than the

substance of the issue and how it affected the U.S. These groups became more excited about the form of presentation, not realizing that you need to know what you want to say before you design a presentation. For Eastwood these two presentations were the low points in the unit and demonstrated the potential danger of issues-centered instruction.

These presentations highlighted the second teaching dilemma. On the one hand, Nicholson and Eastwood wanted creative, high interest presentations that would engage the entire class. At the same time, they wanted presentations that contained substantive content and exhibited a deep understanding of the knowledge. Eastwood believed that the prospect of role playing activities often served to motivate students to delve into the subject matter, what he called "the carrot-in-front-of-the-mule type thing." In both classes, the groups responsible for representing Columbia, Cuba, Haiti, and Panama did become more excited as their conversation moved from the content to the format of the presentation itself (FN, 5/2). Unfortunately, for some groups the resulting presentations were stronger in style than in substance. Meanwhile, other groups merely reported information in dry ways that failed to generate much interest by other members of the class. According to Eastwood, this dilemma particularly resonated with his practice.

Conclusion. The quality of social interaction in these two classrooms varied dramatically. At times, like during the Colombia presentation, there were examples of thoughtful, analytical inquiry where students demonstrated understanding of the complexity of the issue and used evidence to support their beliefs. At other times, like during the drug trafficking discussion or the Cuba presentation, the interaction reflected a more superficial or rote understanding.

The nature of social interaction in the classrooms revealed two teaching dilemmas that depended on the skill of the teacher to manage. Both dilemmas demonstrate a complex web of competing demands for structure, spontaneity, teacher direction, student autonomy, and student interest when developing an in-depth understanding of the knowledge. To manage these dilemmas, both teachers provided brief, condensed readings that would not frustrate low achieving students. Nicholson promoted student spontaneity during the discussion of the data by asking them to gather the data independently using a chart prior to the discussion. He also

realized that some students lacked the confidence at this age to participate in presentations. Therefore, he provided charts and worksheets, models of similar presentations, opportunities for each group to refute comments, and encouraged groups to revise their requests. These structures created a serious, disciplined tone for the activity and provided students with incentives to do their best. Consequently, there was a greater likelihood that the social interaction would not only ignite student interest but be substantive and thoughtful as well.

The Dilemma of Group Work

A third form of social interaction occurred in small groups in which students worked together to gather data and prepare their presentations. Nicholson and Eastwood encountered a third dilemma when organizing and implementing group work. On the one hand, they understood the benefits of group work--placing the responsibility for learning in student hands, promoting trust between the teacher and student, allowing for sharing of ideas, and taking the pressure off the teacher (Interview, 3/7). On the other hand, they admitted that some groups have trouble working independently because of status differences within groups composed of students with different levels of perceived ability, popularity, and motivation (see Cohen, 1994). Diana Monroe, a student in Nicholson's class, confirmed the dilemma. Even though liking the unit, she expressed some frustration about group work, indicating that "two or three people would get off into another little conversation about something totally different" and "just did not want to work." (Interview, 5/23). Frustrated by such behavior, she did not know what to do.

One way Nicholson managed the dilemma was through coaching each group. He described group work with his low achievers this way: "I was like a butterfly academically. I was going from one group to the next group to the next group. I mean it was just a constant merry-go-round." Despite the "constant merry-go-round," he concluded that progress and understanding occurred when he worked individually with each group.

A second way Nicholson and Eastwood managed the dilemma was through the use of student leaders in each group. They chose the members of each group, designating a student

leader in each group who could serve as a tutor and mentor. Realizing the danger of inflating the egos of these leaders, Nicholson and Eastwood met with them one-to-one beforehand to clarify expectations. The best group leaders designated individual responsibilities for each member, communicated with them as they did their work, and stopped periodically to check on what each member had found. In the end, these groups made the most thoughtful and creative presentations. However, the teachers and the students had little experience or training in the tenets of cooperative learning. Consequently, some groups had trouble working independently and their leaders were frustrated in carrying out their function. Despite the variability, mentoring and coaching from the teacher or student leaders did minimize the frustration and inertia in the majority of groups.

Higher Order Thinking

Nicholson and Eastwood recognized that the unit required students to think beyond the recall of facts. They believed that low achievers are capable of thinking beyond recall. However, they also recognized that past experiences often had deprived low achievers of the opportunity to think and express their opinions. Nicholson asserted that teachers assume that low achievers are "meat and potatoes kind of guys" who prefer "straight-forward book questions." Nicholson claimed that teachers who held this belief either "hadn't tried" or were "extremely complacent." Therefore, he and Eastwood set high expectations for low achievers that extended beyond "straight forward book questions." They designed lessons where students created and revised policy.

After planning the unit, however, Nicholson and Eastwood admitted that it might be tough for low achievers because the unit's conceptual framework asked them to apply information in new settings. "Dealing with some pretty heavy duty conceptual things . . .that's a big leap" is the way Nicholson expressed it. Making the leap to conceptual understanding was particularly evident in the country presentations and policy debates. In preparing their presentations on their Latin American or Caribbean country, groups found it difficult to translate raw data from their charts

into clear reasons for why their country was important to the U.S. (FN, 5/6). In preparing for the policy debates, some students had difficulty distinguishing between reasons that support a position and evidence that supports the reasons. Frustration and excitement existed simultaneously in the room during these preparations. Low reading skills, the lack of a right answer, and the challenge of drawing inferences from unfamiliar data were all sources of frustration. Yet many students like Diana Monroe and Jason Hackman were excited about the thinking required by the two activities. Diana applauded the unit because "we got the information, and in that information we had to infer what that meant for policy" (Interview, 5/23). Diana and Jason were excited because these activities were more than just "regular, boring reports" that "none of your classmates listen to." You had to think about what you were doing.

Nicholson and Eastwood managed these frustrations the same way they managed the other dilemmas. They did a good deal of individual and group coaching to help students comprehend what they were reading as well as identify what data were relevant. They asked students to complete charts and worksheets after the two teachers had modeled their use. These charts and worksheets provided step-by-step procedures leading students to draw conclusions or make decisions. Their approach to higher order thinking was to teach specific thinking skills directly, then to ask students to apply them to new content. Both agreed that explicit instruction and coaching were necessary to promote higher order thinking. Without it, they asserted, students who were not already good thinkers probably would not catch on. On the one hand, this approach helped some students to synthesize data, make recommendations, and support them with evidence. On the other hand, other students became captive to procedure, their thinking being mechanical and scripted and their evidence not supporting their reasoning.

Inside and Outside the Classroom

In working with low achieving students, the demand for higher order thinking and the use of small groups took its toll on Nicholson and Eastwood. Inside the classroom, Nicholson found that issues-centered instruction required more stamina and energy than more traditional forms.

"The constant motion and changing of activities takes its toll," he contended. Outside the classroom, he indicated that the extensive planning required by the unit came in conflict with his other responsibilities at school and at home. Specifically, he pointed to his responsibilities at school as a coach (both he and Eastwood were expected to coach one sport) and as a father who regularly arrived home anywhere from 6:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. He wanted more planning time and a teacher's aide to assist with the paperwork. He questioned whether other teachers in his department would be willing to make such a commitment.

Nicholson believed that the unit had "aroused and stimulated interest" in his students and that his students had learned about important issues, but wondered whether he and his colleagues had the energy and whether his school division had the resources and commitment to sustain and support such instruction. The lack of planning time, the non-teaching responsibilities, and the energy demands were in his mind "the biggest negative" about issues-centered instruction.

Student Voices

So far the voices of students are largely missing from the description and analysis of the two classrooms. Nicholson and Eastwood characterized their students as provincial and isolated, even from Preston, a neighboring town of approximately 15,000 people. "They think Preston is on the other side of the world," Eastwood reported in one planning session (FN, 3/20). Nicholson reinforced Eastwood's perception: "Enough of them haven't been out of the state. Hardly out of town. I'm serious . . . They have been to the malls around there, but they can't identify with anything else" (FN, 3/20).

Given their isolation, how did these ninth graders perceive the knowledge and social interaction in the unit? The student survey and interviews revealed that students responded to the knowledge in different ways. Expressing a sophisticated view of the world, one group of students demonstrated and reported a deeper understanding of the interrelatedness of peoples and nations, the divergent perspectives of different cultural groups, and the international origins of certain domestic issues. For example, in their presentation on Haiti, Diana, Tim, and Mary demonstrated

an ability to view the refugee issue from the Haitian perspective. In an interview, Jason Hackman confirmed that he had a more complex understanding of the international origins of controversial domestic issues like immigration:

> So I liked this unit. I didn't know it [immigration problem] was this bad . . . that they were that poor where they just wanted to get away that bad . . . you never really think about where it comes from, like I never thought about the Latin American countries before and how coming over here and their immigrants and everything and so it kind of put it into perspective. (Interview, 5/23).

Comments from the student survey further illustrated this growing world-mindedness:

> "I think everyone is more aware of how important other countries are to the U.S. and what kind of effect they have on us."
> ". . .Latin America is just south of us and shares a border, that alone gives it value; they have great potential to help or hurt us, depending on how we treat them is how they will treat us."
> "I had no idea that Latin America had such a large effect on the U.S."

Nicholson confirmed this change in thinking, claiming that the best feature of the unit was how it helped students become "world thinkers."

Not all students shared this level of understanding. Some students expressed an extended awareness of the complexity of issues like immigration and drug trafficking but did not demonstrate the same level of world-mindedness as the first group. What they learned was more limited to "immigration and drug trafficking and what can be done to stop it" (Student survey). Another group of students saw no or little value to the unit beyond map making. For example, Mike Stewart reported that he learned the most from "making the physical, political and economic maps of the region" (Interview, 5/21).

The student surveys also revealed a wide variation in student reaction to the activities. However, the one consistent area of agreement was that the textbook was uninteresting and not a source for much learning. On the average the highest rated activities, both in terms of level of learning and interest, were the drug route mapping activity that served as the grabber, the use of

PC Globe to gather data, the country presentations, and the policy debates. Students applauded them for their sense of authenticity and interactive dimension:

> "We got to see how politicians might debate a subject."
> "Working in groups because I was able to express my views."
> "Everyone state their opinion and debated back and forth; I wish we had more time to spend on it."
> "I got to voice my opinion; the other class members got to decide which idea was best. I got to ask questions; it was enjoyable."
> "We acted like real government people."
> "When debating about immigration and drugs, we got freedom to argue points and persuade other people."

Students clearly valued the freedom to express their opinions and participate in activities connected to the real world outside the classroom. These low achievers appreciated such opportunities, apparently unavailable and discouraged in previous social studies classrooms. Eastwood confirmed this assertion, commenting that the above quotes were "a key point, what it's all about" (Interview, 9/22).

Others concluded that they learned more from these activities because of the depth of knowledge and amount of higher order thinking required. Lisa Baldwin, in particular, appreciated the exposure to more in-depth information: ". . .you had to know how to get more details out, little problems, not just the big ones as well. So I mean, you were able to learn more" (Interview, 5/18). Jason Hackman agreed, praising the supplemental readings for containing "better, more in-depth and direct information" (Interview, 5/23). In addition, Jason valued being able to use the information for purposes other than recall: "I agreed with this chapter . . .you had to think about what you were doing. You couldn't just sit there; you had to think about what you were doing" (Interview, 5/23).

What many low achieving students seem to value about issues-centered instruction was the opportunity to go beyond passive geography instruction where they sat, listened, and read superficial, bland descriptions of foreign countries. Although struggling in the process, they valued and learned to make inferences and decisions from in-depth information. Likewise, they valued and learned from expressing their opinion and debating the information in ways they had

observed in real life. Last, at least for some, these activities opened up their minds to a deeper awareness of the complexity, differing perspectives, and interrelatedness of the world.

Conclusions

The description and analysis of what happened in these two classrooms suggest that issues-centered instruction is possible and has benefits for low achieving students. Most students praised the interactive nature of the activities and the chance to participate in activities connected to the real world. Most students valued the exposure to information in greater depth than provided by their textbook and the opportunity to think about the information in less passive ways. Several students expressed an increased world-mindedness. This is not to say, however, that the benefits extended to all low achieving students. Some did not participate; some did not contribute to the group projects; others demonstrated only a rote understanding of the countries and issues they studied.

In planning and implementing issues-centered instruction for low achieving students, the two teachers confronted a series of challenges and dilemmas. How do you provide structure and direction that promotes student autonomy and spontaneity, not boredom and passivity? How do you develop the functional knowledge base needed for issues-centered instruction while generating student interest and creative involvement? How do you foster the conceptual understanding of the knowledge without excessive student frustration? How do you facilitate small groups working independently? These questions are persisting ones regardless of the achievement level of the students. However, the questions highlight the reservations that many teachers believe make issues-centered instruction impossible with low achieving students--their insufficient knowledge base, their inability to engage in higher order thinking, their inability to work independently in small groups, and their need for teacher dominated instruction.. Eastwood and Nicholson answered these questions by making adjustments that reflected their perception of the needs of low achieving students. While these adjustments did not resolve fully the challenges

that come with issues-centered instruction, they did make such instruction possible with low achieving students.

There is a final challenge created by issues-centered instruction. It requires more time and energy than more traditional forms of instruction. It requires more extensive planning that can consume hours of a teacher's time. It requires more stamina in the classroom as teachers coordinate student-centered activities. Meanwhile, teachers have a myriad of other responsibilities outside their classroom that also require time and energy. In the end the greatest challenge that confronts issues-centered instruction may be the toll it takes on committed teachers.

What are the implications of these conclusions for the future use of issues-centered approaches to social studies with low achievers? I propose the following ones:

- Teachers approach issues-centered instruction with the full appreciation of the developmental aspects of learning, realizing that such instruction will be new and foreign to most low achievers. These developmental aspects include helping students make the leap to a more conceptual understanding of information, acquire a broader and deeper knowledge base, and develop more confidence when participating in discourse;
- Issues-centered instruction requires a skillful instructor who can design structures that help students understand information and who promotes student autonomy, ownership, and spontaneity;
- Issues-centered instruction needs to combine three instructional elements: (1) explicit and direct skill instruction, (2) a classroom climate that values in-depth knowledge, informed student opinions, and spontaneity, and (3) group work lead by well-prepared student leaders.
- Teachers should approach issues-centered instruction with a realistic understanding of the demands it places on one's time and energy. Issues approaches to social studies demand extensive planning, an enormous amount of energy, and instructional skills not required in more traditional forms of instruction. Yet the grind of the modern high school with its myriad of responsibilities for teachers inside and outside the classroom often limits the opportunities for teachers to plan new curriculum, reflect on their practice, refine their instructional skills or

merely find a quiet moment to catch a second wind. I would suggest that it would be wise for schools as they restructure to provide time for collaborative teacher planning, opportunities for teachers to talk about their practice with respected peers, and opportunities for teachers to observe other skilled teachers;

- Issues-centered instruction would benefit from teacher education programs, both preservice and inservice, that focus on teaching skills such as leading discussions, organizing group activities, and conducting debates, role plays or scored discussions.

Last, I contend that, even though it contains challenges and requires adjustments, issues-centered instruction is possible with low achieving students. Many low achieving students find public issues interesting and enjoy the opportunity the state and defend their opinions. Many students enjoy the exposure to in-depth knowledge beyond the textbook and the opportunity to think about its meaning. Others even develop a more complex understanding and new perspectives about the world in which they live. Furthermore, the belief that low achieving students lack the ability or the motivation to participate in the analysis of public policy is a dangerous one if our central goal is to prepare **all** students to become informed and thoughtful citizens. Becoming such a citizen requires an understanding of the enduring historical and contemporary public issues that have shaped our history and will shape our future. Becoming a citizen requires the opportunity to develop the skills and dispositions to make and defend decisions on these issues in rational ways. Issues-centered offers the promise of moving us toward these goals.

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